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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis of the research described here was that nine-year-old second language learners would improve their linguistic skills through the method of peer tutoring. Four tutors were selected from a group of fourth grade volunteers. The four tutees were second language learners having difficulties with acquiring sufficient English language skills to succeed in the grade. The skills for the lessons were culled from known texts in second language learning and developed into two sets of lessons, one for the tutee and one for the tutor. Ten lessons were taught over a period of two months. However, it could not be determined whether the improvement was due largely to the effects of peer tutoring. Peer tutoring enabled the second language learners to learn in a non-threatening atmosphere, to obtain individualized instruction and to receive immediate feedback to their learning needs. For the teachers of second language learners, the results imply that there is a need to reexamine their roles, methods and techniques in aiming for individualization of instruction. The evidence suggests that the method of peer tutoring for second language learners warrants a more systematic and detailed study. (Author/CLK)

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TEACHING ASPECTS OF SYNTAX TO NINE-YEAR OLD SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS THROUGH THE METHOD OF PEER TUTORING

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INTRODUCTION

New models in language learning are currently exploring methods of individualizing instruction. Among these models is the method of peer tutoring. In peer tutoring, one child teaches another of similar age. This method has had extensive trials in the experiments reported by Gartner, Kohler and Riessman in their book Children Teach Children (1971). These experiments, conducted around the country indicate clearly that the method of peer tutoring has proved successful for the tutor and the tutee. In addition the benefits, both cognitive and affective that accrue to both members of the learning experiment suggest that it could be used effectively with second language learners.

This preliminary study attempted to utilize the method of peer tutoring in order to teach aspects of syntax to second language learners. The hypothesis underlying the study was that nine year old second language learners would improve their linguistic skills through the method of peer tutoring. Improvement in linguistic skills was evaluated formally through tests and informally through teachers opinions on the progress of the children. The following skills were utilized to test the effectiveness of this method. The skills were culled from known texts in second language learning and constituted the essential required for meaningful communication and reading.

1. To identify objects in the classroom environment using the present tense of the verb To Be including the negative and question form. (2 lessons)

2. To identify objects in the classroom environment using the present tense of the verb To Be, concentrating on changing singular noun words to plural noun words. (2 lessons)

3. To change singular noun words to plurals using the determiners "a, the, this, that, these, those." (2 lessons)

4. To use the simple present tense of the verb To Have with the auxiliary "do, does" in positive, negative and question form. (2 lessons)

5. To use "there" followed by a form of the verb To Be with a noun phrase and an adverb of place or time.

6. To use descriptive adjectives before the noun.

These skills were taught in ten lessons over a period of two months. Four tutors were selected to teach four tutees. Of the four tutors, two were boys and two were girls. Each tutor selected a tutee of the same sex. The teams worked 80 minutes per week. The children were taken out of their regular classroom into a separate room. In this room, ordinarily occupied by the Teacher of English as a Second Language, were a chalkboard, books, games, art supplies and realia. Instruction was informal and relaxed.

SUBJECTS

The tutors were volunteers from an environment which can be called "open or informal". This fourth grade open classroom was selected as appropriate for obtaining tutors, since it was assumed that the volunteers within such an environment would have been exposed to several skills needed for effective tutoring. Among these skills, ordinarily promoted in open classrooms were, self selection of materials, sharing of knowledges with peers, and involvement with responsible tasks. The dimension of individual initiative and responsibility promoted in the open classroom was a necessary element for peer teaching. The tutees, on the other hand, were selected from a regular fourth grade class and were identified as language learners on the New York City Language Rating Scale. The tutors and tutees, while from different classes,

were acquainted briefly through common activities such as music, physical activities and lunch.

PROCEDURES

The following procedures were employed sequentially:

1. Skills lessons were distributed on rexograph sheets to tutors and tutees.
2. The instructor taught lessons to both groups.
3. The instructor called attention to the specific directions written on the worksheets.
4. The children divided into pairs.
5. Oral lessons preceded reading and writing exercises.
6. Tutees did independent activities at their own pace. Tutors assisted only when needed.
7. Tutors marked their partner's work.
8. Incorrect responses in the content of the lessons were reexamined.
9. The instructor collected each team's completed worksheets for evaluation.
10. Immediate feedback was supplied in the event tutors made errors in evaluating their partners.
11. If learnings were not sufficiently clinched, additional lessons reenforcing the same skill were planned for the next session.

Modification on this general procedure was employed in order to test which process would be more successful. For instance, the original plan called for initial instruction given by the instructor to the tutors. The tutors would then convey instruction to the tutees However, a modification proved more successful. Instead of instructing one-half the group, the tutors alone, instruction was directed to the entire group. This facilitated the process and permitted both groups to benefit from the instructor's attention.

Prior to the start of the peer tutoring, an orientation session was conducted. In this session, both groups of partners were introduced to each other and to the method of peer tutoring. The explanation included how to conduct the lessons. Two sets of lessons were used, one for the tutor and the other for the tutee. The tutor's sheet had the objectives of the lesson listed at the top, followed by a series of exercises to be conducted orally with the tutee. The last part of the sheet had a copy of the independent work the tutees were to do to test comprehension. A "key" was provided for correcting the answers. The tutee's worksheet stated the objectives of the lesson on the top and specific instructions to listen to his or her tutor. In addition each lesson had two phases, an oral and a written. The lesson always began with oral work and proceeded to reading exercises. In evaluating the children's work, tutors were advised against marking any response as "wrong". All responses were marked "Do over", if incorrect. The instructor continually supervised all efforts.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE METHOD

What are the implications of the method of peer tutoring for second language learning?

For the tutors, their increased responsibility for teaching another person led to an awareness on their part of their own inadequacies with the English language. At the same time their role as tutors gave them an added confidence because of increased status. With the new role, came a closer scrutiny of the discipline needed for work. A youngster who would ordinarily seek

diversion rather than instruction suddenly began to demand attention to work.

Tutors were asked whether they found teaching a satisfactory occupation. Two of the group said that teaching was not 'for them'. However, all were engaged in modeling, correcting, and rewarding behavior. Perhaps the most interesting phenomena to observe was the creative techniques devised by tutors to teach. For instance, one tutor, while teaching a basic vocabulary, demonstrated through the use of live materials or realia to clarify meaning. At times a team worked at the chalkboard practicing a skill. Occasionally a tutor was heard telling a tutee to skip over a part of the work and go to the next part.

For the tutees, the greatest benefit lay in their ability to obtain instruction that was individualized. The tutees were obviously enjoying the closeness of contact, the attention, the immediate feedback, the praises, and the freedom to learn in a relaxed atmosphere. Two boys who were reported by their teacher as not speaking in the regular classroom had no difficulty relating to their peer tutors.

An added dimension of the experience was the sound interaction that was promoted among children of different ethnic groups because of their sharing of learning experiences. Progress in reading was evident as tutors insisted that their tutees emulate their expressive reading, their intonation patterns, their pronunciation of words, and their concern for details.

The implication for the teacher is a change in role from the imparter of knowledge to the facilitator in the individual-

ization of instruction. It became apparent the the method of peer tutoring, just as in other methodologies, required planning with respect to the following:

1. Objectives had to be made very specific.
2. Materials needed to be prepared to teach the specific objectives.
3. Instruction to tutors and tutees needed to be clearly stated.
4. The teacher needed to be flexible in the selection of tutors and tutees.
5. Evaluation had to be an ongoing process with changes and modifications occuring as a result of the process.

CONCLUSION

It appears from the analysis of the test results and from opinions solicited from classroom teachers, that the children had improved their linguistic skills. However, the method of testing whether such improvement was due largely to the effects of the method of peer tutoring could not be determined. This preliminary study lacked the rigor to fully test the hypothesis. However, there was sufficient evidence to suggest that a more detailed and systematic study was warranted.

REFERENCE

Gartner, Alan; Kohler, Mary; Riessman, Frank Children Teach Children: Learning by Teaching. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971